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### A Family Venture

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*Malone University*

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Brady Miller

## A Family Venture

I was part-way through *8 Mile* when Billy stepped into the living room of the trailer wearing nothing but checkered boxer briefs and boots, his knife in his hand. He snapped the blade out, trying to catch my attention. I didn't budge.

"Get off your ass," he said. "We got shit to do."

I remained focused on our little brown-box television. "Still got thirty more minutes. It's the final rap."

Billy strode over to the TV and yanked the cable from the wall. I glared at him for a few seconds. "You seen the fuckin' thing twice already. Now, come on. Get up. And find me some pants. I know you been wearin' mine."

I took my time standing, just to show him he wasn't all that. Still, he knew I'd give. We hadn't had a decent score in weeks. Between Ma going off to jail two years back, Billy losing his job at the auto-repair shop and me scraping together what cash I could from painting fences with Titus Givers and his cousin (and selling skunkweed to the kids at Haskins Jr. High when we could), it was hard enough to keep afloat around here without me watching the same movie three times in a week and ratcheting up the electric bill. But, there was something about the movie, the getting away of it. The folks on the screen were stuck in Detroit, and I was stuck in Alabama. And there was no changing that, only getting away from it for a while. Billy didn't understand. He liked the lot.

"All right," I sighed, picking up my half-smoked cigarette from the ashtray and taking a long drag. I exhaled the smoke at Billy's face. "What's the plan?"

"Tweakers from South Lot brought in a big haul," he said, waving his free hand to clear away the smoke. "Finley said seven thousand. That's a lot of money, little brother."

"Seven thousand?" I repeated, tapping my cigarette against the tray. Billy was expecting me to be excited, and I should have been. But I felt nothing except weight, like a stone, set low in my stomach. The same weight that had been there since Ma had gone. "South Lot, huh?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So," I said. "Last time Northies came over the highway to steal shit Old Ray run 'em off with two Rottweilers and a shotgun. Old Ray cares about his tweakers."

I'd heard that story from Titus Givers, but he was a tweaker himself, same as his cousin, so you really had to take everything they said with a bucketload of salt. Even as I said it, I knew it would never fly with Billy. Seven thousand dollars was too big a score to pass up, even with Old Ray involved.

"He cares about his money," said Billy, grabbing some paint-stained jeans off the floor and pulling them up around his waist. "And about not bringin' the cops down on his lot. He don't give a shit about no tweakers. Now come on. Daylight's wastin'."

He clipped his knife to his pants.

"I'm assumin' Finley wants in on this," I said.

"He's not getting' more than a grand," Billy said, throwing a Monster sweatshirt on over his bare chest. "This is a family venture, and he ain't family." He threw the screen door open and stepped out onto the stoop. I followed him, shielding my eyes from the sun's rays glinting off the next trailer over.

Billy inhaled deep. "Nothin' like that North Lot air." I did the same, got hints of semi fumes and chicken shit. Phenix City Acres was a sea of gravel and sorry crabgrass about two square miles wide. Nobody who lived here called it by its name. To us it was the North Lot, cause it was north of the 280, what us Alabamans call the Highway to Hell on account of it runs into Phenix City. On the other side was the Mobile Manor—the South Lot. They're separate worlds, really, with years of hate between them, though nobody really knows why. Ma always used to scoff at that. "It's goddamn trailers," she'd say. "Don't much matter where you set 'em."

I always agreed with her, but most Northies didn't. Crossing over the interstate was like going behind enemy lines. Me and Billy used to do it on the regular, take whatever we could. Beer, generators, small cash. Sometimes we'd score big and find some dope we could sell. Never something like this though.

Finley's trailer was far from ours. We made our way there in silence, passing a cigarette back and forth as we walked, gravel crunching under our feet. I heard Finley's voice before we even knocked on his door, loud, slurred, angry. His new woman Judelle was yelling too.

"You get my damn ritalins like I asked?" came her voice.

"I told you to stop takin' them things, baby," Finley said. "They'll rot your brain." A faucet turned on, and his big boar face appeared in the kitchen window. I flashed him an empty grin. Billy waved.

“I told you I got ADHD,” Judelle called. “Doctor said so.”

Finley shook his head. “Shit, baby, the boys are here.” He turned around. “Pick that shit up.”

“Who?”

“Marcy Wiggins’ boys. Pick that up, be a good hostess.”

The trailer squeaked in protest as the big man ambled to the door and shoved it open, slamming it against the side of the trailer. “Try and ignore the mess,” he muttered.

The two of us stepped inside, scrunching together to fit. Finley himself took up most of the room, while Judelle lay with her legs across the sofa. A mess of nail polish, beer bottles, and dirty dishes sprawled across the coffee table in front of her.

“You can’t be Marcy Wiggins’ boys,” she said. “You was just tots last time I seen you.”

“We grown some since then,” Billy said.

Judelle laughed. “Got handsome, too. Hey, whatever happened to your Ma? I don’t see her around anymore.” I glanced sideways at Billy. We didn’t like talking about Ma. Hell, we rarely spoke of her ourselves anymore. Lucky for us, Judelle saw that Finley was glaring at her and said, “I’ll go. Let the big boys talk shop.” She stood and sauntered back to the bedroom.

Once she was gone, Finley let out a long sigh. “She’s a good enough cook, just won’t shut up for more than five minutes at a time. How can I help you boys?”

“Them tweakers over in Ray’s Lot,” Billy said. “We’re gonna rob ‘em. And we need a gun.” I shifted my feet a little. We’d never brought a gun with us before. Never could afford one, anyway.

Finley shook his head. “Ain’t gonna have no weapons charges to my name. That ain’t how I do business.”

Billy didn’t say anything to that, so I spoke up. “Can you give us the trailer number?”

Finley sighed. “You know I mentioned that score to Bill in passin’ conversation. Didn’t really mean for you boys to do nothin’ about it.”

“You’re a damn liar, Finley,” said Billy. “You want in and you know it. How else you gonna pay for your woman’s pills?”

Finley cracked a devilish smile at that. “You gonna cut me in?”

“Yeah, okay,” Billy said, pacing the length of the room. He shot me a strange look, then shouldered his way past me and outside. I watched him go.

“Number’s 525,” Finley said.

At half-past twelve, me and Billy left the North Lot and headed over to the interstate. From here you could see almost all of the North Lot, sprawled out below, a hundred little lights in the darkness. Beyond that sat a couple miles of farmland, and then the city. Somewhere in the distance, a factory belched up flame and smoke into the milky dark sky. Ma used to say that factory looked like hell from here. I’d tell her that if the factory was hell, the North Lot must be purgatory. She’d always smile when I made jokes like that, and act like she knew. Like we were sharing something. But in the end, she was really just the same as all the rest around here. Desperate, sure. But in love with this place, just like Billy. It was all she knew, all she’d ever known.

Billy and me waited until there were no cars coming down the highway and dashed across, our boots clapping loudly on the asphalt. We stopped when we reached the median strip, took a breather. Billy kicked at a McDonald’s bag. “Fuck,” he said.

“What?”

He pulled up his jacket and pulled something out of his belt. Black and shiny metal. A gun.

“Where’d you get that?” I said.

“Swiped it from Finley’s trailer,” he said. “I seen him put it behind his toaster last time I was there.”

I shook my head. “How we gonna explain this?”

“He’ll come around once he sees the money, I figure,” said Billy. He stuck the pistol back into his belt. Something jumped into my mind, from the movie earlier. When that dumbass Cheddar Bob shot his own leg trying to stick a gun back in his pants.

“I don’t mean to use it anyway,” Billy said. “Just figured it’d be nice to have. How am I supposed to protect you if all I got’s a switchblade?”

“I never asked you to protect me,” I said.

“Yeah, well you don’t need to,” he said. “We’re family. Family looks out for each other.”

I shook my head. There were more cars coming now. “You make me a promise then, Billy.”

“We better run,” he said, and took off. I had to follow, clomping along behind him.

“A promise,” I said breathlessly as we reached the other side.

“You’ll get some of the money,” he said, smirking that way he always did when he thought he knew better than me.

“It ain’t about the money, Billy,” I said, and felt my voice go soft as I said it. “It’s about you, me. We got to get out of here. I say we take the money and run.”

Billy just kept smirking. “You think somewhere else is better than here?”

“I’m damn sure of it,” I said.

“Where, then?” Billy threw his hands out as if motioning to the entire world. As if he knew the entire world and knew none of it was better. “Phenix City?”

“No, not Phenix City,” I said. “We could go anywhere, Billy. Hell, we could buy us a boat and float on down the Chattahoochee like Huck Finn.”

Billy just shook his head. “Huck Finn’s a storybook, little brother. And what about when Ma gets back? What, we supposed to just leave her with jack shit? We’re a family.”

“Family,” I repeated. The word was like acid. “What is that?”

Billy took a step back. “I’m hurt, little brother. I mean, you ain’t tryin’ to say we ain’t family are you?”

“I don’t know, Billy,” I said. “You throw that word around like it means somethin’ to you. Ma threw it around before that. Said family always sticks together, through the thick and thin. And then she went and held up a gas station cause she ran out of money to buy liquor. That sound like family to you?”

Billy’s face was strangely blank. “Anything else you want to get off your chest? Cause we got a job to do.”

“Yeah,” I said, and I knew there was no stopping the words now. “Cause you know it’s real funny how you talk about providin’ for us and protectin’ us and goin’ to rob tweakers but you’re too fuckin’ lazy to get another job after you got fired from your last one. Hell, I don’t even mind that I had to drop out of school to go paint fences, but you been out for two years and you been unemployed for one of ‘em. And on top of it all you steal Finley’s gun behind my back. Have you ever even shot a gun before?”

Even as I said it, I knew I’d crossed a line. I thought Billy might take a swing at me. I’d seen him throw punches over much less. But, instead, he just spat on the ground and started walking toward the South Lot. “Do what you want,” I heard him say. “I will promise you this, little brother, you ain’t gonna find no place out there better than here.” He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “And I’m gonna get that fourteen thousand, with or without you.” He whooped into the night. “I’ll be livin’ like a goddamn king!”

I almost followed him down, but something held me back. Every step he took killed a little part of me. Like watching everything I knew about myself leave, and letting it happen. One of those choices you never thought you'd make until you'd already made it. And I'd made it.

I was numb as I walked back out onto the interstate, numb as I stuck my thumb out into the air. I scuffed my shoes against the dull concrete. I'd crossed this road more times than I could count, a divider between two worlds. Soon, both of those worlds would be gone, and the road would be just a road. Just a road, with thousands more like it. I waited there for what seemed like a hundred years before a lone green pickup truck finally slowed to a stop beside me. By the time the driver rolled down the passenger side window and asked me if I was lost, I almost forgot to say anything.

Finally, I said, "No. I'm from around here. I'm tryin' to get somewhere."

"Where you trying to get to?" he asked.

"Anywhere, really," I said. "Where are you headed?"

"Atlanta. I'm going to see my mother."

Of course. Billy's words tore through me like a slug: *We supposed to just leave her?* If I opened that door and got in, I was doing just that. Chances were I'd never see Ma again. Or Billy. And much as I wanted to deny it, I knew that I *meant* not to see either of them ever again, and that scared me more than I could say. So, I didn't say anything, but just stood there as if my legs had locked.

"You can ride along," the man continued. "Just know I got a gun if you try anything." He gave me a severe look. "You aren't gonna try anything, are you?"

I shook my head. "I ain't got nothin' to try it with."

He laughed, which somehow cut away at my nerves a little. "Get in, then."

I did get in, on shaky legs, and shut the door, and we were soon rattling along down the interstate, the soft thrum of the tires lulling me back into numbness. I stared out the window, watched the world pass by, and for the first time in a long while, there was no stone in my stomach. It was just empty.

"Hey, guy," the driver said. "You like music?"

"Sure," I said, shifting a little in my seat. "What kind?"

"Any kind," he said. "My mother, she's old fashioned. You know, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, all of them. Me, I like the Boss."

“The who?” I said.

“The Boss?” he said. “Bruce Springsteen? Come on, man.” He pulled a tape out of the center console and pushed it into the tape deck. A song started to play.

“Yeah this is a good one,” he said. “*Land of Hopes and Dreams*, I love it.”

“Hopes and dreams, huh?” I said. “You got any of those?”

He shook his head up and down to the beat. “Tons,” he said. “Right now, my hope and dream is finding a 24-hour Denny’s, if you know what I mean, huh?”

I laughed a little, sat back and listened to the music. It wasn’t half bad. Billy would have liked it. If I did see him again, I’d play it for him. If he ever got out. If he wasn’t lying on the South Lot ground, the gravel and dirt that he loved drinking his blood. That picture jumped into my mind, like a movie screen. I had the eyes of a bird, watching from above, circling my dying brother. He smiled up at me. I couldn’t make him stop, no matter how hard I tried. I wanted to cry, needed to, but my eyes stayed drier than the dirt below. And the wind filled my wings, carrying me higher and higher until I was gone.